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What is Original?

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WHAT IS ORIGINAL?

Borrowing ideas from other people is a double-edged issue. In our youth it is called *learning*. Later on, we understand the difference between learning and copying. It is a confusing difference, because we are taught to understand that copying while giving due credit to the original source is part of the scientific world. In some sense, it helps further progress.

This thought on achieving progress is probably best formulated by Isaac Newton (1643-1727) when he wrote a letter to his scientific “competitor” Robert Hooke (1635-1703) with the following paragraph: “What Descartes did was a good step. You have added much several ways, and especially in taking the colours of thin plates into philosophical consideration. If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

I am tempted to take this statement as a point of departure. However, is the statement itself original? Currently, we are supported by appropriate knowledge available on the Internet (with thanks to Google). There we find that the latter statement comes from the monk John of Salisbury. Further investigations show that the phrase may even pre-date John of Salisbury, and that it should be ascribed to Pierre Abélard (a French theologian and poet, 1079-1142). Salisbury’s main activities were adapting and refining the work of others. And what about Newton? He was definitively not adapting and refining the work by others, as we all know. His statement on standing on the shoulders of giants is interpreted as “using the understanding gained by major thinkers who

have gone before in order to make intellectual progress.” However, now we may be in trouble since no attention is paid to moral values and ethics. Below I offer you some food for thought in four points.

First, on March 14, 2007 the Silicon Valley watcher Stefan Stern published an article in the Financial Times under the title: *What is “original content”?*. The essence of his article is: borrowing ideas from other people is intellectual theft; it is not only dishonourable – it’s also bad poetry. One of his stronger statements is: “All content is the result of “remixing” or “mashing-up” of culture.” Remarkably, Stern himself had stolen his ideas from T.S. Eliott (again thanks to Google): “Bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.” The matter is touchy and difficult, particularly since others state that “intellectual property rights block the search for new ideas.” As a consequence of this development the research area of BioMed has established a Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Second, obtaining a Ph.D. thesis is still an effort worthwhile to pursue. One *original* idea may suffice to be the basis for such a thesis, but it should be a good idea. The thesis author should contribute to the scientific knowledge in his/her area of research. The contribution should be assessed as valuable by recognized peers. This is not the place to analyse the plagiarism as performed by Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the former Minister of Defence in the German Government, which caused great upset, at least in Europe. Obviously, what he did is wrong, rejectable, and can be considered as a gross ethical error. However, what he did (or at least tried to do) was: “using the understanding gained by major thinkers ...”

Third, this issue starts with a contribution by our President, David Levy, titled *Attack of the Clones*. The computer-chess world is facing rumours that “steal the kudos of tournament successes” (Levy). As an Editor I would like to advise you to read the article and to examine other information on the *originality* of techniques that is available on the Internet. There is an official ICGA Forum (see p. 6) where established researchers and former participants of the WCCCs have given their opinion and experiences. I am invited to participate, but being a seasoned Tournament Director over many years, I refrained, since I am sure that sooner or later such cases have to be judged by the ICGA. Up to then, I would not like to be involved in the discussion.

Fourth, “using the understanding gained by major thinkers ...” is a phrase that is open to *original cheating*. As a telling example I use the Sebastian Feller case, in which the scientific results of our computer-chess community play a major role. On March 19, 2011 the following verdict was made official by the Disciplinary Committee of the French Chess Federation against the GMs Sebastien Feller, Arnaud Hauchard, and IM Cyril Marzola for “a violation of sporting ethics at the Olympiad in Khanty-Mansiysk in September 2010.” Feller received a 3-year ban followed by 2 years of community service with the federation or another association. Hauchard was condemned to a lifetime ban from the duties of captain. Marzola was sentenced to a 5-year suspension. The case with all its details is too complex for this Editorial. Thus, I refer again to the Internet for information “on cheating at chess using computers”. I can assure you that they had an original method for their cheating.

At this point it is time for another topic in this Editorial. In the world around our scientific preserve, many things are happening. Our sympathy goes to Japan and their inhabitants. We wish them strength and power to recover from the disasters that came to them. In this issue we report on the Kanazawa events (part 3) and on the 2011 Japan Prize Award to Dennis Ritchie and Ken Thompson. The Board of ICGA, the Editorial Board, and all our readers would like to congratulate our frontrunner researcher, our eminent member and previous secretary-treasurer Ken Thompson with the reception of the Award (see p. 57). Many researchers of our community stand on his shoulders. Thank you, Ken!

Finally, the question arises how are we going to continue? I believe that some wise words are necessary, therefore I quote Aristotle. “And for this reason as no one could ever learn or understand anything without the exercise of perception, so even when we think speculatively, we must have some mental image (*phantasma*) of which to think (Aristotle, *De Anima* 111.8, 432a8-9). However, even this does not solve our ideas on what is original?

Jaap van den Herik

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